



City taxpayers pay \$107K for waterline near Coakley landfill

By Jeff McMenemy

jmcmenemy@seacoastonline.com

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PORTSMOUTH -- The taxpayers of Portsmouth have already been assessed \$107,102 for their share of paying for half the cost so a developer can run a municipal water line to a new development in Greenland.

City taxpayers have paid the money to the Coakley Landfill Group even as city officials - and lawyers and consultants hired by the group - continue to say the landfill poses no threat to public health or safety.

The CLG reached a deal in 2016 to pay as much as \$200,000 to reimburse developer Eric Chinburg for his cost to run a water line to a new development being built near the Superfund cleanup site. City Attorney Robert Sullivan, who is also chairman of CLG executive committee, previously said the CLG agreed to pay Chinburg - in part by billing Portsmouth, North Hampton and Newington taxpayers - because the developer "expressed the concept of litigation" over concerns about contaminated water.

But the CLG has steadfastly refused to run municipal water to other homeowners living around the landfill in North Hampton and Greenland. Former Assistant Mayor Jim Splaine said the refusal of the CLG and city to help other homeowners concerned that toxins leaching from the landfill will contaminate their drinking wells is "really sad."

"I think it displays arrogance on the part of city government, both their inaction and mismanagement in the past three decades of the Coakley landfill issue," Splaine said Wednesday.

His comments come a day after Mayor Jack Blalock traveled to Concord to testify against a bill that if passed would require the CLG to install a pump-and-treat system at the landfill to clean up PFAS chemicals and 1,4-dioxane, both suspected carcinogens.

Splaine again on Wednesday called for Sullivan to step down as CLG chairman. "The city has a responsibility to respond to Coakley," he said. "We should be providing support for the people of Greenland as well as other parts of the Seacoast. It's our responsibility."

The payment to the CLG by Portsmouth taxpayers is included in minutes of the group's executive committee meetings.

The CLG is made up of municipalities and private companies that used the landfill or transported waste there. They are responsible for cleaning up the contamination at the site as outlined in two consent decrees and records of decision reached with the Environmental Protection Agency and N.H. Department of Environmental Services.

The Portsmouth Herald reported last week that the CLG began fighting the required remedy of a pump-and-treat system at the site in 1995. The EPA ultimately dropped that part of the remedy. The CLG also used \$3.1 million from the trust created to clean up the landfill to pay a settlement to a company it hired to cap the landfill, and then fired.

“It just amazes me that the city of Portsmouth is doing everything it can to justify what it has done in the past by creating this wall against any kind of criticism that has been raised,” Splaine said. “They’re kind of saying everything we’ve done in the past is OK and it’s justified. That’s the way city management works. In the past four years I’ve seen it up close and personal.”

He maintains City Manager John Bohenko and Sullivan share “total responsibility” for CLG operations.

“Individually they’re good people, but they have let down the people of Portsmouth and more importantly the people in the Seacoast,” Splaine said. “I would have expected more of them. They could have become leaders in correcting the problem, but it appears they’re not going to.”

The CLG also billed Newington \$10,926 and North Hampton \$8,126 for their share of the Chinburg water line. Both towns have already made their payments, according to meeting minutes.

Reached Wednesday, Bohenko stressed DES officials have said “at the present time there is no immediate danger out at the Coakley landfill.”

“I think it’s important for the newspaper to say there’s no public threat to humans at this time,” he added.

Bohenko noted as city manager “my role is to protect the city of Portsmouth and its taxpayers and its residents.”

“I think that as a city we’re going to continue to work with the EPA to make sure we comply with all the standards put forth,” he said. “Everything out there is below 20 parts per trillion.”

Tests on groundwater in monitoring wells at the site found PFOS chemical levels as high as 1,108 ppt, according to the DES and EPA, and 1,4-dioxane over its health advisory level. The EPA’s health advisory for PFAS chemicals is 70 ppt. PFAS chemicals and 1,4-dioxane are suspected carcinogens and, as

emerging contaminants, have extended the time the CLG must monitor the site. PFOS chemicals have been found in the surface water at Berry's Brook at levels much higher than the EPA level for groundwater.

Testing at private residential wells have all tested below the level.

"I agree with the assistant mayor that we should work to continue to make sure things are done right," Bohenko said. "Quite frankly, for the past 30 years things have been done right."

According to CLG documents, installation of the cap was impacted by incorrect engineering, incorrect work, schedule delays and cost overruns. The landfill was fully closed in 1985 and the cap was completed in September 1999.

Bohenko said if the EPA requires the CLG to clean up Berry's Brook "I don't think anybody is going to fight that."

"The years I've worked on the Coakley landfill with Bob (Sullivan) I've always let the engineers and scientists and engineers work on the project and followed their advice," Bohenko said.

Sullivan has said he believes the remediation at the landfill won't be complete until 2035.

"2035 is a long time out," Bohenko said. "Whatever it is the EPA requires us to do, we'll do everything that's necessary."

State Rep. Mindi Messmer, D-Rye, said environmental advocates question the CLG's decision to pay for part of the cost of the water line to Chinburg's development while not extending it farther along Breakfast Hill Road.

"Literally 100 feet from (the development) there are wells across the street in the Stone Meadow Way area," Messmer said. "The people in the September Drive area have elevated concentrations above what other states would let you drink."

Those levels for the September Drive homes for PFAS chemicals are in the 30s, she said.

She understands why other residents are upset with the deal the CLG made with Chinburg.

"They bought their homes without even knowing Coakley was there," Messmer said. "Now they're stuck with private wells. Yet this brand new development right smack on the entrance to the landfill is being supplied with municipal water at the expense of Portsmouth taxpayers."

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